



## AT THE GATE

By E. Nesbit

THE monastery towers, so pure and fair  
As virgin vows, reached up white hands to Heaven;  
The walls to guard the hidden heart of prayer  
Were strong as sin, and white as sin forgiven.  
And there came holy men, by world's way driven;  
And, all about, the gold-green meadows lay  
Flower-decked, like children dear that keep May-holiday.

"Here," said the Abbot, "let us spend our days  
Unsweetened by the lilies of pure prayer,  
Fragrant with white garlands of the rose of praise;  
And—last the world should enter with her aware,  
Should enter and laugh and take us unaware  
With her red rose, her purple and her gold—  
Because we a stranger's hand the porter's keys to hold."

"They chose a beggar from the world outside  
To keep their world-wand door for them, and he,  
Fled with a humble and adoring pride,  
Built up a wall of proud humility  
Between the monastery's sanctity  
And the poor, foolish, helpless folk who came  
To ask for love and care—in the dear Saviour's name.

Or when the poor crept to the guarded gate  
To ask for succor, when the tired asked rest,  
When weary souls, bereft and desolate,  
Craved comfort; when the murmur of the oppressed  
Sounded round the grove where Prayer had made her nest,  
The porter bade such take their griefs away  
And at some other door their legs and burden lay.

For this," he said, "is the white house of prayer.  
Where, day and night, the holy voices rise  
Through the chill trouble of our earthly air  
And enter at the gate of Paradise.  
Trample no more our flower-fields in such wise,  
Or crave the aims of our deep-bosomed thought;  
The prayers of holy men are aims enough, I trow."

Seeing that no sick or sorrowing folk  
Came ever to be healed or comforted,  
He Abbot to his Brothers gladly spoke:  
"God has accepted our poor prayers," he said;  
"Over our land His answering smile is spread;  
He has put forth His strong and loving hand,  
And sorrow and sin and pain have ceased in all the land.

So make we yet more rich our hymns of praise;  
Warm we our prayers against our happy heart;  
For God hath taken the gift of all our days  
To wait a spell that bids all wrong depart.  
Has turned our praise to balm for the world's smart,  
And filled our prayer and praise by every hour  
Or God transfigures praise and transmutes prayer to power."

With the years, the flowers blossomed new  
Untrampled by the dusty, weary feet;  
Shrunk hung the green and golden bough,  
For none came now to ask for love or rest—  
For ghastly food, or common bread to eat,  
Or dreaming, praying, the monks were satisfied  
If, God remembering him, the beggar-porter died.

Then they had covered up the foolish head  
And on the blind and loving heart heaped clay,  
Which of us, Brothers, now," the Abbot said,  
"Will face the world—to keep the world away?"  
But all their hearts were hard with prayer, and "Nay,"  
They cried, "Ah, bid us not our prayers to leave,  
—Father! not to-day—for this is Easter eve!"

And while they murmured, to their midst there came  
A beggar, saying, "Brothers, pray be still!  
In your Brother, by Our Father's name,

And I will be your porter, if ye will.  
Guarding your gate with what I have of skill."  
So all they welcomed him and closed the door,  
And gat them gladly back into their prayers once more.

But lo! no sooner did the prayer arise,  
A golden flame shewed the chapel dim,  
Thence came the porter, crying, "Haste, arise,  
A sick old man waits you to tend on him;  
And many wait—a knight whose wound gases grim,  
A red-stained man, with red eyes to confess,  
A white-faced mother who brings her child for you to bless."

The Brothers hastened to the gate, and there  
With unaccustomed hand and voice they tried  
To ease the body's pain, the spirit's cry;  
But, ere the task was done, the porter cried,  
"Behold, the Lord sets your gate open wide.  
For here be starving folk who must be fed,  
And little ones that cry for love and daily bread."

And with each slow-foot hour came over a throng  
Of piteous wanderers, sinful folk and sad;  
And still the Brothers ministered, but long  
The day passed, with no prayer to make them glad.  
No holy meditative joys they had,  
No moment's breathing-place could poor prayer find  
Mid all those hearts to heal and all those wounds to bind.

And when the crowded sunset day at last  
Left the field lonely with its trampled flowers,  
Into the chapel's peace the Brothers passed  
To quell the memory of those hurrying hours.  
"Our holy time," they said, "once more is ours!  
Come, let us pay our debt of prayer and praise,  
Forgetting in God's light the darkness of man's ways!"

But ere their voices reached the first psalm's end  
They heard a new, strange rustling round their house.  
Thence came the porter—"Here comes many a friend  
Pushing aside your bedding orchard boughs.  
Come, Brothers, justify your holy vows;  
Here be God's patient, poor four-famed things;  
Seek healing at God's well, whence lovingkindness  
springs!"

Then cried the Abbot in a vexed snarl:  
"Our brethren we must aid, if 'in God's will,  
But the wild creatures of the forest war,  
Himself God heals with His Almighty skill.  
And charity is good, and love—but still  
God shall not look in vain for the white prayers  
We send on silvery feet to climb the stony stairs."

"For, of all worthy things, prayer has most worth,  
It rises like sweet incense up to Heaven,  
And from God's hand falls back upon the earth,  
Being of heavenly bread the accepted leaven.  
Through prayer is virtue saved and sin forgiven,  
In prayer the impulse and the love are found  
That bring, in purple and gold, the faithful souls to Heaven."

"For prayer comes down from Heaven in the kiss  
That gives life and joy to all things made;  
Prayer falls in rain to make broad rivers run,  
And sows the seeds in earth's brown bosom laid;  
By prayer the red-bug branch is earthward weighed;  
By prayer the barn grows full, and full the fold,  
For by man's prayer God works His wonders manifold!"

The porter bowed his head to the reproof,  
But when the echo of the night's last prayer  
Died in the library of the vaulted roof,

A whispered memory in the hallowed air,  
The Abbot turned to find, still standing there,  
The porter, and his face was still bowed down  
As when it humbly bent before the Abbot's frown.

"Brother," the porter spoke, "I crave thy leave  
To leave thee—let to-night I journey far—  
But I have kept your gate this Easter eve,  
And now your house to Heaven shines like a star  
To show the Angels where God's children are;  
And in this day your house has served God more  
Than in the praise and prayer of all its days before."

"Yet I must leave you—though I fain would stay—  
For there are other gates I go to keep;  
Of houses round whose walls, long day by day,  
Shut out of hope and love, poor sinners weep.  
Barred folds that keep out God's poor wandering sheep;  
I must teach these that gates where God comes in  
Cannot be shut at all to pain or want or sin."

"The voice of Prayer is very soft and weak;  
And Sorrow and Sin have voices very strong;  
Prayer is not heard in Heaven when these twin speak;  
The voice of Prayer faints in the voice of Wrong.  
By the just men ordered—oh, Lord, how long!—  
If ye would have your prayers in Heaven be heard  
Look that Wrong clamor not with too intense a word!"

"But when true love is shed on want and sin  
Their cry is changed, and grows to such a voice  
As clamors sweetly at Heaven to be let in—  
Such sound as makes the saints in Heaven rejoice—  
Pure gold of prayer, purged of the vain alloy  
Of idleness—that is the sound most dear  
Of all the earthly sounds God lends from Heaven to hear."

"Oh, Brother, I must leave thee, and for Me  
The work is heavy and the burden great.  
Thine be this charge I lay upon thee: See  
That never again stand barred thy abbey gate;  
Look that God's poor be not left to fate.  
Ah, me! that children thy shepherd's needs must be  
When My poor wandering sheep have so great need of Me!"

"Brother, forgive thy Brother if He chide.  
Thy Brother loves thee—and has loved. For see,  
The nails are in My hands, and in My side  
The spear-wound; and the thorns weigh heavily  
Upon My brow. Brother, I died for thee—  
For thee and for My sheep that are astray,  
And rose to live for thee, and them, on Easter Day!"

"My Master and my Lord!" the Abbot cried,  
But, where that Face had been, above the new day,  
Only, on the marble by the Abbot's side,  
Where those dear Feet had stood, a lily lay—  
A lily white for the white Easter Day.  
He sought the gaze—no sorrow clamored there,  
And, not till then, he dared to sink his soul in prayer.

And from that day himself he kept the gate  
Wide open; and the poor from far and wide,  
The weary and wicked, and disconsolate,  
Came there for succor and were not denied;  
The sick were healed, the repentant sanctified,  
And from their hearts so up more prayer and praise  
Than ever the abbey knew in all its prayer-filled days.

And there the Heavenly vision comes no more,  
Only, each Easter morn, a lily sweet  
Less white and dewy on the chancel floor  
Where once stood the beloved wounded Feet.  
And the old Abbot feels the morning bent  
Of wings that bring him leave at last to go  
And meet his Master, where the immortal Bliss grows.

Original from